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AUTHOR Engel, John W.
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ABSTRACT

This study describes the attitudes of Japanese housewives toward women's employment, and compares them with those of American housewives. A questionnaire was designed to assess beliefs and attitudes related to women's roles in work and family life. It was translated into Japanese for purposes of comparison. Questionnaires were administered to over 200 Japanese and American housewives. T-tests were used to test for significance of differences between groups. The results showed that Japanese and American housewives had only a slight tendency to believe that they could be happy as full-time housewives. Both groups agreed that a mother should not be employed when there is an infant or pre-school child in the family. In comparison with American housewives, Japanese housewives tended to believe more strongly that a wife/mother's employment would have harmful effects on marriage and child development; that married women should be home rearing children instead of working outside the home; and that a wife/mother should not be employed when there is a school-aged or teenage child in the family, or when a husband wants her home. American houewives tended to believe more strongly that women are capable of handling both homemaking and career responsibilities. Findings are discussed in terms of comparative cultural traditions and change. (Author)

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A Comparison of Japanese and American Housewives' Attitudes Toward Employment of Women*

John W. Engel**

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**John W. Engel, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Department of Human Resources, University of Hawaii, Miller 110, 2515 Campus Road, Honolulu, Hawaii 96822.

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Abstract

This study compares the attitudes of Japanese housewives toward women's employment with those of American housewives. A questionnaire designed to assess beliefs and attitudes related to women's roles in work and family life was translated into Japanese for purposes of comparison. Questionnaires were administered to over 200 Japanese and American housewives. T-tests were used to test for significance of differences between groups.

Japanese and American housewives had only a slight tendency to believe that they could be happy as full-time housewives. Both groups agreed that a mother should not be employed outside the home when there is an infant or pre-school child in the family. In comparison with American housewives, Japanese housewives tended to believe more strongly that a wife/mother's employment would have harmful effects on marriage and child development, and that a wife/mother should not be employed when her husband wants her home, or when there is a school-aged or teenage child in the family. American housewives tended to believe more strongly that women are capable of handling both homemaking and career responsibilities. Findings are discussed in terms of cultural traditions and change.

A Comparison of Japanese and American Housewives' Attitudes Toward Employment of Women

Japanese women are often viewed as paragons of housewifery, homemaking and domestic arts. American popular press columnist Sylvia Porter (1981) describes the Japanese housewife as "the world's best financial manager." Indeed, traditional female education in Japan trained girls to be "good wives and wise mothers." According to Baron Kikuchi (1909, cited by Smith, 1983), a former Minister of Education and President of both Tokyo and Kyoto Universities, a "good wife and wise mother" should be prepared "to help (her working man), for the common interests of the house, and as her share of duty to the state, by sympathy and encouragement, by relieving him of anxieties at home, managing household affairs, looking after the household economy, and, above all, tending the old people and bringing up the children in a fit and proper manner." While many women in traditional Japan did work outside the home, in agriculture and textile industries, the cultural ideal was for women to be housewives, that is "good wives and wise mothers" (Smith, 1983).

In recent years, both Americans and Japanese people have experienced changes in family and work life. In America, women have joined the work force in record numbers, and attitudes toward women's roles have changed substantially (Engel, 1978). In Japan, the family cycle has changed dramatically since World War II (Kumagai, 1984), with implications for women's careers in family and employment. While nearly all Japanese women marry, the typical Japanese woman marries later (when she is in her mid or late 20's) and has more time to develop a career than did her predecessors. On the average, Japanese women have their first child one year after marriage and their last child two years later. Their shorter child bearing/rearing period provide additional time for career development. One might expect corresponding changes in traditional values related to housewifery. Nevertheless, Japanese women continue to be stereotyped (by Americans, particularly) as being "unliberated" and extremely traditional in their feminine roles and attitudes. Very little empirical data exist that actually compare Japanese and American women.

Method

A questionnaire was designed to assess beliefs and attitudes related to women's roles in work and family life. It included items used in previous research (e.g., Engel, 1978, 1985, 1986; Engel & Davidson, 1981) on women's roles. Items offered a Likert scale response format: strongly agree to strongly disagree. After pretesting on American subjects the English version of the questionnaire was translated into Japanese. The two language versions were "back translated" (Brislin, 1980) for equivalency and revised accordingly.

Questionnaires were distributed to over 200 Japanese (N = 136) and American (N = 75) housewives. The sample was limited to housewives in an attempt to control for possible effects of employment experience on attitudes and beliefs. The Japanese women averaged 35 years of age, compared with 36 for the Americans. The Japanese had an average of 13.2 years of education compared with 13.6 for the Americans. While the Japanese women had on the average 1.3 children, the American women had 2.1; and Japanese women reported and average household size of 3.5 compared with 3.3 for the American women.

T-tests were used to test for significance of differences between Japanese and American group means. F-tests were used to test for significance of differences between group variances.

Results and Discussion

The results of comparisons of Japanese and American housewives' attitudes toward women's employment are summarized in Table 1. Differences between means were found to be significant ($p < .05$) in 8 out of 11 cases.

Insert Table 1 about here.

While Japanese and American groups did not differ significantly in their beliefs regarding whether they could be happy as full-time housewives (item 1), there was a general tendency for the Japanese to be "uncertain" (mean = 3.35) and the Americans to "agree" (mean = 3.57) that they could be happy as housewives.

Assuming that women have some freedom to seek employment should they not be satisfied as housewives, one might expect samples of housewives to be self-selected and relatively homogeneous in believing that they could be happy as housewives. Japanese responses to item 1 varied significantly ($F(74,131) = 1.71$, $p < .01$) less than did American responses, suggesting that Japanese housewives are more homogeneous in their attitudes related to this issue than are American housewives. However, neither group believed strongly that they could be happy as housewives. One might wonder why a sizable minority of both groups of housewives either did not believe or were uncertain about whether they could be happy as housewives. Could it be that freedom of choice is limited? Could it be that there is dissatisfaction among housewives in both countries? The latter interpretation adds support to Lebra's (1984) observation of some devaluation of housewifery in Japan. Additional research is needed to explore farther how women, both Japanese and American, feel about their current work/family roles, and to identify factors related to variation in satisfaction or "happiness" with those roles. Dissatisfaction with the housewife role may suggest additional changes in women's roles in the future in both Japanese and American

societies.

While both Japanese and American groups believed that women are capable of handling both home and career (item 2), American housewives agreed more stongly with this item than did Japanese housewives. It could be that American women were more influenced by the idea popular in the 1970's that women "could have it all." It may also be that American women see more women around them that are indeed successfully combining work and family life.

Although both groups tended to be uncertain whether "difficulties are likely to arise in marital adjustment when the wife is employed outside the home" (item 3), Japanese housewives agreed with this statement significantly more than did American housewifes.

Japanese housewives tended to believe significantly more than American housewives that women belong in the home caring for children. While American housewives tended to disagree, Japanese housewives tended to be uncertain whether "married women should be home, having or raising children, instead of being employed outside the home" (item 4).

Similarly, while both groups tended to be uncertain about whether maternal employment has harmful effects on child development (item 5), Japanese housewives believed this to be so significantly more than did American housewives. It could be that some respondents were uncertain because this item did not differentiate between children of different ages. The results of the following items should help to clarify this question.

Both Japanese and American groups agreed that mothers should not work outside the home when there is an infant (item 6) or a preschool-age child (item 7) in the family. No significant differences were found between Japanese and American groups on this item. Additional research is needed to explore the basis for such sentiments, to determine for example whether subjects believe that quality childcare services can not be substituted for biological mothering during this age range without hurting the child.

Both groups tended to be more uncertain about whether mothers should work outside the home when there is a school-age (item 8) or teenage (item 9) child in the family. Additional research is needed to explore whether school-aged and older children are believed to be no longer vulnerable to potential harmful effects related to maternal employment.

Japanese subjects tended to believe significantly more than did American subjects that mothers should not work outside the home when there is a school-age or teenage child in the family.

Japanese housewives tended to agree significantly more than American housewives that wives should not work outside the home when their husbands want them home (item 10). The Japanese response to this item is consistent with traditional Japanese laws that gave men authority over women; and customs wherein women were expected to obey three men in their lifetimes, first their fathers, then their husbands, and finally their oldest sons (Smith, 1983). On the other hand, it is surprising that the American sample did not reject this idea more strongly, given America's liberation movement and previous research (Engel, 1978) carried out in the late 1970's showing an increasing tendency for unmarried college students to reject husbands' authority over wive's employment related decisions. Related to this issue, it appears that American housewives are not very "liberated," despite being more so than Japanese housewives. Japanese responses to this item varied significantly ($F(74,132) = 1.69$, $p < .01$) less than did American responses, suggesting that Japanese

housewives are more homogeneous in their attitudes related to this issue than are American housewives. The mean tendency to be "uncertain" and the greater variance of American housewives' responses may be a reflection of continuing liberation of American women from male dominance.

While both Japanese and American groups agreed that a wife/mother should not work outside the home when she doesn't want to (item 11), Japanese housewives agreed with this item significantly less than did American housewives. Considering America's traditional emphasis on freedom, individualism and self-determination, it is not surprising that American women would feel strongly that personal preference be an important consideration in whether or not a woman works outside the home. That this would be considered less important by Japanese subjects is consistent with traditional Japanese emphasis on duty and responsibility to the family.

The findings on item 11, suggesting that personal preference is less important, in the decision to work or not work, to Japanese than to American subjects, may be related to earier findings on item 1, and the issue that was raised regarding to what extent Japanese housewives

were free to choose their life style. It may be that Japanese housewives have less freedom of choice and fewer alternatives to their traditional duties and responsibilities in the family. If that were the case, it would not be surprising then that some Japanese housewives might feel dissatisfied or at least uncertain about their potential for personal happiness in the housewife role. Indeed, Japanese responses to item 11 varied significantly more ($F(130,74) = 1.99$, $p < .01$) than did American responses, suggesting more controversy and perhaps change among Japanese housewives towards greater individualism.

Generalizations from this study should take into account various limitations in the data. There is no guarantee that the women sampled in this study adequately represent all housewives in either Japan or America. Indeed, additional research is needed that expands the sampling to include part-time and full-time working women as well, and that differentiates groups according to work motivation. Sex differences have been found in American attitudes toward women's employment (Engel, 1978, 1980). Research is needed that explores whether similar sex differences exist in Japan and how potential differences affect women and family life.

The "quasi-experimental" (Campbell & Stanley, 1966) research strategy used in this study assumes exposure to different cultures to be equivalent to different treatments. It also depends upon control of extraneous variables. Of particular concern in cross-cultural research are comparability of instruments and comparability of samples. Every effort was made to insure that the English and Japanese versions of the questionnaire were equivalent, and equivalency was confirmed through "back translations" (Brislin, 1980). Similarly, every effort was made to insure that the Japanese and American samples were equivalent and that extraneous variables were controlled. The two samples were essentially equivalent on age and years of education. American housewives reported more children while Japanese housewives reported larger household sizes.

The smaller number of children and larger household size reported by Japanese housewives can be explained in terms of more caring for elders within the family context, according to Japanese traditions. Despite evidence (Kumagai, 1984) that there is a growing trend towards more nuclear family structures in Japan, this

study suggests that there is still more of a tendency for Japanese than American families to include others besides two generations of parents and children. One can only speculate whether these factors are related in any way to attitudes toward women's employment. Housewives who have responsibilities for the care of elders, as well as husband and children, probably have less time for career development than those who are only responsible for childrearing. It appears that definitions (which include role expectations) of housewife differ by culture. In this case, a Japanese definition of housewife would include responsibilities to family elders that would not be included in an American definition of housewife.

Conclusion

In summary, Japanese and American housewives were found to have only a slight tendency to believe that they could be happy as full-time housewives. Both groups agreed that a mother should not be employed outside the home when there is an infant or pre-school child in the family. In comparison with American housewives, Japanese housewives tended to believe more strongly that a wife/mother's employment would have

harmful effects on marriage and child development, that married women should be home rearing children instead of working outside the home, and that a wife/mother should not be employed when there is a school-aged or teenage child in the family, or when a husband wants her home. American housewives tended to believe more strongly that women are capable of handling both homemaking and career responsibilities, and that a woman's personal preference should be an important consideration in whether or not she works outside the home.

While the data provide evidence that Japanese housewives are indeed more conservative than American housewives in their views and attitudes toward women's employment, the data also suggest that Japanese housewives are uncertain about some of their traditional values and their uncertainty may be an indication of controversy and change in Japanese society.

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Table 1
A Comparison of Japanese and American Housewives' Attitudes Toward Women's Employment

Attitude or Belief	Japanese (n = 136) Mean	American (n = 75) Mean	t
1. I could be happy as a full-time housewife/househusband.	3.35	3.57	1.38
2. Women are capable of handling both home and career.	3.58	3.99	3.32**
3. Difficulties are likely to arise in marital adjustment when the wife is employed outside the home.	3.36	2.96	-2.63**
4. Married women should be home, having or raising children, instead of being employed outside the home.	2.68	2.26	-2.61**
5. Maternal employment is likely to have harmful effects on children's development.	3.11	2.66	-3.06**
6-11. GIVEN THAT A FAMILY HAS ADEQUATE FINANCIAL SUPPORT, A WIFE/MOTHER SHOULD NOT WORK OUTSIDE THE HOME . . .			
6. when there is an infant in the family.	4.12	4.07	-0.40
7. when there is a preschool-age child in the family.	3.67	3.65	-0.14
8. when there is a school-age child in the family.	3.49	3.13	-2.42*
9. when there is a teenage child in the family.	3.55	2.80	-5.37***
10. when her husband wants her home.	3.79	3.07	-4.79***
11. when she doesn't want to work outside the home.	3.68	4.28	5.49***

Note. Means were calculated from Likert scale scores, i.e., 1 = "strongly disagree," 2 = "disagree," 3 = "uncertain," 4 = "agree," and 5 = "strongly agree."
*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.